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PM's flying start must be sustained over longer term

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi has had an impressive first month in office and this performance has now to be sustained. There is a national feel-good mood and anticipation of better things to come. People are happy the transition from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has gone so well.

Abdullah has taken the premiership in his stride. His first public statements have been inspiring. They have indicated the gradual shift to a New Agenda in three areas:

In his first speech to the public, when he met humble farmers and fishermen to give them flood relief aid, he called on Malaysians to "work with him" and "not for him" in the interest of the nation.

His maiden official speech was reserved, most appropriately, for Parliament. He described it as, "a symbol of my respect for this august institution".

What was most striking was his solemn declaration in Parliament:

"I am fully aware of the need for me to carry out my duties with integrity, trustworthiness, efficiency and fairness.

"I am aware that I will be assessed by the members of this House, by the people and above all, by the Almighty.

"The position and the power that have been entrusted to me is a test from God for this humble servant."

Then, the Prime Minister has taken many significant steps that reveal his direction and style of management.

He asked the judiciary to change the public perception that they are not independent. He has asked for co-operation from the authorities, and told them to avoid paying mere lip service.

He told ministers at his first Cabinet meeting that they should tighten procedures and reduce bureaucracy to fight corruption.

Indeed the New Economic Policy, and the whole country, will come to grief if bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption are not checked.

The Prime Minister advised that the outmoded district offices should be re-engineered and that inefficient local authorities be reorganised.

He has to seriously consider the replacement of appointed local government officials with elected councillors who would be more accountable and can be voted out of office if they do not perform.

Alternatively, he could dismiss corrupt and inefficient nominated municipal councillors.

His surprise visit to the Immigration Department was welcome. Such surprise visits should continue.

Basic common sense proposals made by the Prime Minister, like arranging separate counters for the handicapped, the aged, pregnant women and little children as well as senior citizens, are surely within the capacity of civil servants to initiate on their own .

Or have many civil servants lost their sense of empathy and compassion? If this is the case, they should be phased out.

The Prime Minister's innovative leadership should be followed up by senior officials in all government agencies, not just the Immigration Department. Unless there are major improvements on the ground soon, there will be a major credibility gap, which could affect the ruling party in the coming election.

It would, therefore, be useful if Abdullah encouraged the public to support him by providing feedback on corruption and inefficiency in

government services.

Even the tragically high death rates on our roads could be considerably reduced, if corruption is attacked more aggressively.

Thirdly, it is salutary that the Prime Minister gave an assurance that minority groups would not be sidelined.

Many of these groups feel marginalised by the way policies are implemented by over-zealous politicians and civil servants.

We need research into this minority fatigue to find the truth and to strengthen national unity.

The Prime Minister's most important economic policy statement, however, was made in Dewan Negara when he tabled the Mid-

Term Review of the Eighth Malaysia Plan.

He said Bumiputera industries were fundamentally weak which is why they have not achieved the 30 per cent equity ownership.

The shortfall in the equity target is also largely due to the quick disposal by many Bumiputeras of their newly acquired equity for easy profit.

If there was better management of these new share acquisitions, we could have achieved much more progress than the present Bumiputera equity share of only RM73 billion or 18.7 per cent of total equity capital.

The Government now proposes to achieve the target of at least 30 per cent by 2010.

One way it hopes to attain this goal is to provide at least 60 per cent of public sector procurements to Bumiputera businessmen.

Some large government agencies are already giving nearly 100 per cent of their contracts to Bumiputera contractors.

But many of them sell their contracts to non-Bumiputera contractors at high premiums.

That is why we often have abandoned or badly-built projects which are a waste of taxpayer's money.

The Prime Minister offered a noteworthy proposal to overcome this long standing problem, urging Bumiputera contractors to progress with the help of non-Bumiputera contractors.

Perhaps the Government should offer the larger and more difficult contracts to Malaysian companies with majority Bumiputera or government equity.

This way, they will gain valuable experience and more equity ownership and the non-Bumiputera contractors will not feel alienated.

The people would, in the coming months, like to see more evidence that the Prime Minister's policies are efficiently executed and sustained in the longer term for the benefit of all.